



EMIC

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE IN STORIES

Handbook of Methods
for Practitioners

2024 Edition

 **ICD**
ORGANIZATION FOR IDENTITY +
CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT



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IDENTITY+CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Understanding Culture in Stories

A Handbook of Research Methods

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Introduction

Preventing physical and cultural harm and violence, solving problems, and enhancing and fulfilling human potential can be effectively achieved by adopting identity-based approaches. The [OICD's EMIC \(Engaging Methodology for Identities in Conflict\) method](#) aims to use the power of identity and culture in countering discrimination and conflict and helping build peace and cohesion. The word EMIC means “understanding from within”. Indeed, the first step of this methodology is to gather as much information as possible on a population’s use of symbols and narratives - in doing so we hope to be able to “see the world through the eyes” of the people we are working with.

Speech, conversations, monologues and stories are narratives that are extraordinarily rich in cultural information. As Jane H. Hill highlights, “Narratives are not merely overtly ‘about’ some ‘content’, such as what happened when, where, and to whom”. Rather, “They make public the covert underlying presuppositions that organize the worlds in which speakers live”.

This handbook aims at giving you the tools to be able to deconstruct the intricacies of narratives and understand the cultural symbols, norms and dynamics of a population. With this skill as a foundation, you will be able to begin to consider how to respond to situations where identity-based dynamics drive marginalization, discrimination and conflict, and to start to work to reverse such forces in order to enhance community cohesion and release human potential.

The methodologies offered in this handbook are drawn from *Finding Culture in Talk – A Collection of Methods* edited by Naomi Quinn¹. They are presented here in a transparent, ready-to-use, step-by-step format. The methods in this handbook are in order of complexity. ‘Method 1: Simple Analysis’ guides you through the steps of a basic cultural analysis that explores the most straightforward clues of culture in speech. ‘Method 2: The Missing Piece’ invites you to go further, and question what is left out from the narrative – as often, taken-for-granted facts and ideas are exactly the shared basis of a cultural framework. ‘Method 3: Analysing Incoherence’ suggests that lapses of logic in narrative, far from indicating a lack of rhetoric coherence, flag important places for cultural analysis. ‘Method 4: Analysing Stories’ explores how the latter are culturally-laden and suggests that the way they are told offers great

¹ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016[2005]). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer.

insights into cultural norms and symbols. 'Method 5: Analysing Metaphors' provides you with a guide to detect the intersubjectively shared dimension of metaphors, and to understand how this can influence readers or listeners' perceptions. 'Method 6: Ideas that have Power' guides you through the steps of analysing different forms of discourses, specifically the use of social discourse and the articulation of controversial or debatable ideas. Finally, a series of exercises are offered at the end of the handbook in order for you to test the different methodologies you will have learnt reading this handbook.

Applying these Methods - Keep the Following Points in Mind

While reviewing the methods, it is important to keep in mind the following:

- Some methods may be more pertinent or appropriate than others according to the context of the discourse or conversation you are analyzing.
- There is no one right way to conduct a cultural analysis, and the methods you choose to adopt depend on the aspect/s you wish to investigate.
- Do not rely on one single methodology, even if it does seem very enlightening. By applying different methods in combination you will gain a greater insight.
- If you are not sure what you are looking for in the first instance, you can simply apply the methods in an ad hoc way, choosing more deliberately and specifically once you have revealed some of the dynamics you seek to understand.
- Regardless of the method chosen, be aware of the power dynamics between the people who talk and those who listen. As Jane H. Hill highlights (p. 183), "A powerful person can command the attention of a subordinate even though her narrative may be an un-suspenseful account of a mundane occurrence. People without power, however, may find no audience even when they have something very important to say."
- Analysing the power dynamics between the people engaged in a conversation or between a speaker and his/her listeners represents very enriching groundwork to conduct an insightful and reliable cultural analysis in speech.
- Remember that simple physical actions are often culturally coded. In addition to the role that discourse plays, be observant of a range of "performance" gestures and actions to help you flesh out and confirm/deny the strength of given identity expressions in

discourse. This might include gestures that accompany anecdotes or parts of anecdotes in conversation. Physical actions themselves can embody and express identity choices such as with cultural physicality of eating, ordering or preparing food in a particular way, washing dishes, doing laundry, greeting people, or any number of apparently everyday tasks or activities.

- ➔ If you are analysing an interview, keep in mind that your attitude might influence your interlocutor. Expressing interest in specific points of your interlocutor's speech might prompt him to talk more extensively about it than he would have done otherwise. For instance, recurrence of topics or keywords might be the result of your behaviour.

Method 1: Simple Analysis

Conversations or speeches can be long, complicated, blurry, technical, layered, conflated and very hard to digest. Spotting keywords and transcribing interviews, conversations or speeches into simple propositions make the content more transparent and digestible, as recommended by Roy d'Andrade². These simple propositions will help you build a model to analyse the individual's cultural framework with greater ease.

How to...

... analyse keywords

- 1) find every instance where the speaker uses the keyword or discusses a specific concept
- 2) identify associations: what is the word connected with, what does it relate to? (verb, action, negation, affirmation, interferences with other things, value)

Note: frequency of mentions does not necessarily reveal much if for instance the interviewee is influenced by the interviewer's "subtle forms of encouragement" (Claudia Strauss, p.213³) (e.g. looking interested or not)

How to...

... transcribe interviews into simple propositions

Note: You will need flashcards (ideally 3x5)

- 1) Start by transcribing the speech into simple propositions. It is very important that you keep your informant's words.
- 2) Write each proposition on a flashcard.
- 3) Spread all of the flashcards on a table.
- 4) Group the cards into piles by topic. First, you will regroup the very obvious similar propositions. Then, from these groupings you will be able to construct larger groupings.

² Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 83

³ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer.

Example 1

The excerpt of speech: “The problem is, you can moan and carp and whine and complain all you want about it, but there are some people that don't want to be helped and want to be left alone. If a guy wants to sit on top of forty acres on top of a mountain in Tennessee and make whiskey and drink himself blind drunk, leave him the hell alone.”

The gist propositions here are:

1. Some people want to be left alone and do not want to be helped.
2. People who want to be left alone and do not want to be helped should be left alone.

Example 2

The excerpt of speech: “Human equality? That's the supposition by some group of idiots that all men are created equal in reality when they're not. Each person is an individual. Each person has God given talents, just like fingerprints. There are no two of us alike. No matter how hard people try to make us alike, we are not alike individually.”

The gist is two propositions:

1. All people are not created equal because people are created with different talents.
2. Some people who suppose that humans are not created with different talents try to make us all alike but they cannot.

Go further...

Although this method is very useful to identify key ideas of cultural frameworks, what is left out of speech is also revealing – see Method 2.

Method 2: The missing piece

Method 1 described how to extract key ideas from narratives. However, speakers do not talk about taken for granted, mundane things, as Jane H. Hill argues, they narrate the “unexpected and deviant sequences of events” – what has to be reported according to them. The taken for granted ideas and facts are nevertheless the basis of a cultural framework. Indeed, what people do not talk about, what is considered not worth making explicit, is what the individuals from the same background may agree upon, and may not challenge. As Claudia Strauss highlights: “What is tricky about finding shared cultural assumptions in talk is that ordinarily these deep assumptions are left unsaid.”⁴

How to

Here is a non-exhaustive list of questions you can ask yourself:

- Why do they report some events and not others?
- What are they leaving out?
- Why do they emphasize some aspects and not others?
- What does that reveal about their way of thinking and cultural background?

When doing a cultural analysis, highlighting these choices and differences will help reveal the shared cultural framework.

Example⁵

In a study of Ecuadorian illness narratives⁶, the ethnographer Laurie Price analysed stories of family illnesses told by Ecuadorian women. He realized that the women did not talk about the

⁴ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 204

⁵ example elaborated from the pp. 180-181 in Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer.

⁶ Price, Laurie. 1987. Ecuadorian illness stories: Cultural knowledge in natural discourse. In *Cultural models in language and thought*, ed. Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, pp. 313-342. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

elements of their caregiving. This included for instance carrying heavy children long distances for medical attention.

Why is this left-out fact interesting to someone doing a cultural analysis?

Because it reveals that the idea of a mother doing such things is taken for granted. There is therefore no need to explicitly mention it. And here, realizing this is useful in exploring and understanding cultural gender roles and norms.

In comparison, the speakers talked about the fact that doctors and nurses were kind to them. The fact that this was worth reporting shows that it was an unexpected and exceptional fact. What is reportable highlights what the norm is in these contexts.

Note:

This method will be particularly useful in a context where the people come from the same background, or 'cultural group' (Here cultural group is understood in a broad sense. For instance, if you are analysing narratives engaging with religion and spirituality within a group of catholic individuals, the cultural group in that scenario is the individuals from that catholic background engaging in the discussion on religion and spirituality – what connects these individuals is the cultural element of religion). Indeed, when people come from the same background, they will not necessarily state what seems 'obvious' or mundane to them. In a group constituted of individuals from diverse backgrounds, the 'obvious' will tend to be most often stated and made explicit.

Method 3: Analysing Incoherence

As explained in the introduction, when people talk it does not only convey the intended meaning of the speech, it also conveys many other elements that inform us on the speakers' cultural framework. Incoherent moments in speech are good opportunities for cultural analysis. As Jane H. Hill argues, "the best opportunities for analysis arise where the analyst finds deviations from expected narrative structures, and where it is difficult to see how coherence has been achieved".

How to

- 1) Start by detecting 'lapses of logic'
 - These can be: logical gaps, logical clashes, unexpected silences, disfluency, false starts, filled pauses, hesitation forms etc.
- 2) Analyse where in the narrative the 'lapse of logic' has occurred
 - someone does not answer exactly the question asked
 - do the gaps occur around key words or themes?
- 3) Investigate what the gaps of logic reveal. For each 'type' of lapse of logic, there are different possible explanations. Evaluate according to the context, which explanation is the most accurate and relevant to your situation.

Example 1: Not answering to the question

Jane H. Hill illustrates her chapter⁷ by using some of her ethnographic material: "I said [the ethnographer], 'So, when do you have time for your family?' [The interlocutor] says, 'My family needs the money, and nobody else'll give me a job, because I don't have the papers? So where do I go?' "

⁷ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 157

The conversation's main themes were: racism and undocumented latino workers in the US.

Here we notice a lapse of logic as Jane H. Hill's interlocutor does not respond exactly to the question asked.

We could hypothesize that the interlocutor wants to draw the attention away from the fact that she does not have much time to see her family. She rather emphasizes that her family is in need of money and that it is difficult to find work because of her lack of papers.

Example 2: Different possible explanations of disfluency

As mentioned earlier, one type of 'lapse of logic' can be explained in different ways, and this is very dependent on the context. Disfluency in narratives have been analysed in several ways. Below, two explanations are presented:

- One possibility: It has been argued "that disfluency, especially the kinds of false starts that suggest that speakers have gotten tangled up in their own syntax, is typical of speech that is very "original" in its content, where speakers are trying to manage novel topics or genres for which they do not already have thoroughly routinized skills."
- Another possibility: "Speakers are disfluent because they are attempting to say the unsayable, to articulate representations or opinions that are normally repressed as dangerous to the speaker's mental stability."

Source: Jane H. Hill in Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer. p. 194

Method 4: Analysing Folktales

This method is quite different from the other methods of this handbook as we are looking at a very specific genre: the folktale. Folktales are extraordinarily rich culturally as they are passed down from generation to generation orally. Moreover, they are rich in symbols. The way folktales are narrated can reveal a lot about cultural norms and individuals' positioning towards these norms. Indeed, as folktales are narrated orally, great variation can be noticed in the way they are told. Holly F. Matthews reflecting on her ethnographic material argues: "Although these accounts are all versions of the same base folktale, they vary considerably in the events recounted, in the motivations attributed to the main characters, and in the moral meanings derived from the characters' actions."⁸ In her chapter, Holly F. Matthews highlights how men and women share different versions of the same folktale, and how these versions encapsulate important information about gender. She was able to detect the broader cultural conceptions of gender-associated morality.

How to:

- In order to analyse variation in accounts of folktales, you will need to engage with various interlocutors.
- Make sure your interlocutors are from varied backgrounds, and cultural and social groups.
- Choose your interlocutors according to the topic you are analysing: if engaging with matters of gender talk to men *and* women, if engaging with matters of race and racism talk to people from different ethnic backgrounds, if engaging with religious matters talk to people with different beliefs etc.
- Compare the accounts of the folktale and detect the variations.
- Ask yourself (this is a non-exhaustive list of questions):
 - ✓ Around which keywords do these variations occur?
 - ✓ What themes are engaged with?
 - ✓ What do these variations reveal in terms of cultural norms and taken-for-granted ideas?

⁸ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 106

Example: *La Llorona*

These two accounts of the same folktale are from Holly F. Matthews's fieldwork, and provide great insights into gender norms and expectations.

A middle-aged man's account:

"La Llorona was a young woman married to a good man. They worked together and had children and all was well. But La Llorona liked to gossip and she began to walk the streets and was often gone. She did not feed her husband or tend to her children. When her husband found out, he beat her. And she was filled with shame (pena) and so she drowned herself in the river."⁹

A young women's account:

"La Llorona was an innocent, young girl married to an older man. At first all was well. But he began to drink and spend money on other women. When she asked him to give her money for food, he cursed her and beat her in front of the family. So she killed herself. And now she often comes back as a beautiful spirit dressed in white. And when men are out drinking and running around on their wives, they often see her and follow her into the river and die. And all because they do not treat their wives well."¹⁰

⁹ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 109

¹⁰ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 110

Method 5: Metaphor Analysis

Metaphors, in the same way as taken-for-granted non-stated ideas and facts, are culturally laden as what they effectively do is to reference an often hidden but shared understanding of the world. Moreover, as Naomi Quinn highlights, “metaphors in speech are like flags waving, or Xs that mark the spot”¹¹. Metaphors can be used to clarify, emphasize or illustrate a point. Metaphors can also be used to further a specific agenda or to describe specific facts in a certain light, to influence the listener or reader’s perception (see Example 2).

When doing a cultural analysis, use the metaphors you detect as clues. They signal important elements.

How to

- 1) Start by detecting metaphors in speech
- 2) What topic is the metaphor engaged with?
- 3) Ask yourself what the purpose of this metaphor is. Is it to illustrate or clarify a point? Is the speaker/narrator trying to influence perceptions? Is there another kind of agenda?
- 4) Classify the metaphors into different categories. When creating your categories keep in mind both the topic and the purpose of the metaphors.

Note: some metaphors are so rooted in speech that they have become ‘normalised’, and one can forget they are metaphors. Example: “falling in love”.

Example 1¹²

Here, the ethnographer Naomi Quinn, exemplifies the different categories she mapped out throughout her interviews about marriage in the United States:

- **lastingness**: "To have that bond between us. I think he felt that once we had a child we wouldn't split as easily".
- **sharedness**: "[O]ur existence is so intertwined".

¹¹ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 49

¹² Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 48

- **(mutual) benefit:** "But I feel pretty mutual about, we both have as much at stake in the relationship as the other person does".
- **compatibility:** "We've scarred each other, and we've helped each other, and we've kind of meshed in a lot of ways".
- **difficulty:** "[O]ver the years we've bit by bit negotiated our way through the rough spots"
- **effort:** "[T]hey were different issues that were being worked on those marriages than in ours, I think".
- **success (or failure):** "[referring to circumstances that might lead to divorce] [I]f you're in a no-win situation, you've got to take the best door out".
- **risk:** "[When you get married] you're playing the odds; you're playing percentages. You're betting that the great majority of the time with that certain person that you will enjoy being there".

Example 2

Extract from an Article by Melissa Burkley in Psychology Today

Metaphors go beyond just comprehension and demonstration, they actually change the way we think of a concept on an unconscious level. To demonstrate this, consider a study conducted by Thibodeau and Boroditsky in 2011. In it, half of the participants read about a crime-ridden city where the criminal element was described as a beast preying upon innocent citizens (animal metaphor). A separate group read essentially the same description of the city, only it described the criminal element as a disease that plagued the town (disease metaphor). Later, when asked how to solve the crime issue, those who read the animal metaphor suggested control strategies (increasing police presence, imposing stricter penalties). Those who read the disease metaphor instead suggested diagnostic/treatment strategies (seeking out the primary cause of the crime wave, bolstering the economy).

This study shows that by changing the metaphor actually changed the way readers thought about the crime issue. If it was a beast, it needed to be controlled. If it was a disease, it needed to be treated. Thus, writers can use metaphors to strategically control their readers' perceptions.

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-social-thinker/201711/why-metaphors-are-important>

Method 6: Ideas that have power

There are three types of ideas that have power: 1) those that are deeply internalized – and are at “the core of what is meant by culture” (such as the mundane non stated taken for granted – see Method 2), 2) public ideas, which articulate ideologies and social discourses (made explicit), and 3) common opinions that vary from one individual to another. These categories are not bounded, as cultural standing is a continuum. As Claudia Strauss suggests: “important points along this continuum could be labelled as follows: Controversial Opinion - Debatable Opinion - Common Opinion - Taken-for-granted”¹³.

It is important to keep in mind that public opinion can influence the way people express more controversial or debatable personal views. Indeed they might censor them in a specific context, or on the contrary, defend their views with vehemence.

How to...

... analyse social discourse

The difficulty in analysing social discourses is that one has to be familiar with the discourses prior to the analysis, in order to detect the instances where social discourses are incorporated into the text analysed.

- 1) locate the traces of different social discourses – look for ideas, jargon, specific terminology and phraseology characteristic of these discourses
- 2) consider their placement in relation to each other – “Placement refers to whether the different ideas are expressed in close proximity as part of a connected discussion of a single topic or in different contexts.”

Example 1:¹⁴

In the context of the abortion debate in the United States, different terminologies and expressions are used according to which ideology one adheres too.

¹³ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 232

¹⁴ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 222

“Pro-choice” → preferred self-designation by abortion rights supporters

“Foetus” → word used by abortion rights supporters

“Pro-life” → preferred self-designation by abortion opponents

“Unborn child” → word used by abortion opponents

Knowing these differences enables the analyst to understand which social discourse the interlocutor adheres to.

* * *

Often, it happens that a text or narrative interweaves different types of social discourses and in that sense is intertextual. The way the speaker blends the different discourses together does not necessarily appear to make sense, to be coherent and these discourses might even be conflicting. But it is the role of the analyst to understand **what ties** these discourses together. The speaker might even be aware that the discourses he is articulating are conflicting, but that does not necessarily mean they are irreconcilable. It can for example suggest ambivalence within the speaker’s narrative: he or she is ‘torn’ between two discourses or ideologies.

Example 2:

"This is probably all they'll eat, anyway. And that really, oh, that hurts bad. You know, uh - I don't want - but then, this is how they're brought up. So, if you're brought up this way, you just think this is right. [Mmh] You know no other way. You think that's in the movies, where you see everybody sitting around a beautiful table, all loaded with food. It's movies. You know, 'cause I see things in the movies and I say, "Well, that's just Hollywood." I don't accept it. And, maybe this is what these kids say, and feel, and think. And so that's how they live. Uh. I'd like to see that [...]. I want to see these people off the streets. Working."¹⁵

Here, Carol Russo, one of Claudia Strauss’s informants, expresses ambivalence within her discourse as she seems to favour policies that limit income support to poor families, but she also hates to see children starving.

¹⁵ Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2016). Chapter 5. *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Springer., p. 228

How to...

... analyse debatable and controversial ideas

When someone expresses a view that is controversial in the group represented by their audience (or in the larger society), he or she might censor themselves, state their views in a guarded way, acknowledge that there are other opinions etc.

Here are some of the clues that you should look for to assess whether the idea articulated is taken for granted, debatable or controversial:

- words such as 'may', 'should', 'probably' signal low commitment to the proposition
- layering different types of speech – ***lamination*** – is another way of modalizing an idea
Examples: pretending to be serious, adopting a sing-song tone
- hesitation
- phrasings such as "I think", "I view", "In my opinion", or "To me" acknowledge that there are other opinions